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May 20, 1:11 PM EDT

Iran tests missile with range that can hit Israel

By ALI AKBAR DAREINI
Associated Press Writer

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) -- Iran test-fired a missile capable of striking Israel, U.S. Mideast bases and Europe on Wednesday - a show of strength touted by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as he battles for re-election next month against more moderate opponents.

The U.S. responded by saying Iran must choose between destabilizing the Middle East or accepting the dialogue offered by President Barack Obama. The U.S. leader threatened earlier this week that Iran could face further international sanctions if it does not respond positively by year-end to U.S. attempts to open negotiations on its nuclear program.

Israel said the test appeared to be Iran's response to a positive meeting on Monday between Obama and new Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

U.S. officials confirmed the launch and Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman said in Washington that Iran is at a crossroads and must choose its course.

"They can either continue on this path of continued destabilization in the region or they can decide that they want to pursue relationships with the counties in the region and the United States that are more normalized," said Whitman. "Our concerns are obviously based on nuclear ambitions and the implications that long- and medium-range missiles have with respect to that," he added.

Alex Vatanka, a senior Middle East analyst at Jane's Information Group, said the test "does not change the strategic equation" in the region because Iran has had the ballistic missile capability to hit Israel and much of the Middle East for more than a decade with its Shahab missiles.

It was likely intended to send a message to the Obama administration that Iran cannot be bullied into talks and also to show the country's strength in hopes that would boost Ahmadinejad's popularity among voters in the June 12 election, Vatanka said.

Iran says its missile program is merely for defense and its space program is for scientific and surveillance purposes. It maintains that its nuclear program is for civilian energy uses only.

Tehran said the solid-fuel Sajjil-2 surface-to-surface missile has a range of about 1,200 miles. It is a new version of the Sajjil missile, which the country said it successfully tested late last year and has a similar range. Many analysts said the launch of the solid-fuel Sajjil was significant because such missiles are more accurate than liquid fuel missiles of similar range, such as Iran's Shahab-3.

"Defense Minister (Mostafa Mohammad Najjar) has informed me that the Sajjil-2 missile, which has very advanced technology, was launched from Semnan and it landed precisely on the target," state radio quoted Ahmadinejad as saying. He did not name any targets for the missile when he spoke during a visit to the city of Semnan, 125 miles east of the capital Tehran, where Iran's space program is centered.

Italy said its foreign minister, Franco Frattini, canceled a planned trip to Iran on Wednesday because Ahmadinejad wanted to meet in Semnan rather than in Tehran.

Najjar said the Sajjil-2 differs from the Sajjil missile because it "is equipped with a new navigation system as well as precise and sophisticated sensors," according to Iran's official news agency.

Sajjil means "baked clay." It is a reference to a story in the Quran, Islam's holy book, in which birds sent by God drive off an enemy army attacking the holy city of Mecca by pelting them with stones of baked clay.

Two U.S. officials confirmed the missile launch, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak on the record.

"It appears the test was a success," one official said. "It appears they launched a medium-range missile."

After the test, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton warned that if Iran manages to produce nuclear weapons, it would "spark an arms race" in the Middle East.

Iran's nuclear and missile programs have alarmed Israel. Prime Minister Netanyahu pressed Obama to step up pressure on Tehran when the two met in Washington on Monday.

Moshe Arens, a former Israeli defense minister who trained in the U.S. as an aerospace engineer, said Wednesday's test was apparently part of Iran's broader quest to develop more advanced missiles and nuclear capability.



AP Photo

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"They're increasing their abilities to launch rockets of longer and longer range that go beyond Israel and into Europe and eventually will carry nuclear weapons," he said. "They're troublemakers and you have to deal with troublemakers."

Ahmadinejad has repeatedly called for Israel's elimination, and the Jewish state has not ruled out a military strike to deal with the Iranian nuclear threat. The Israeli government has been skeptical of U.S. overtures to Iran, which have received a mixed response from Ahmadinejad.

Many Western experts have expressed skepticism about Iran's professed military achievements, saying the country provides no transparency to verify its claims. Most believe Iran does not yet have the technology to produce nuclear weapons, including warheads for long-range missiles.

The U.S. released an intelligence report about 18 months ago that said Iran abandoned a secret nuclear weapons program in 2003 under international pressure and has not restarted it.

Israel and several other countries have disputed the finding. But many in the West at least agree that Iran is seeking to develop the capability to develop weapons at some point. A group of U.S. and Russian scientists said in a report issued Tuesday that Iran could produce a simple nuclear device in one to three years and a nuclear warhead in another five years after that.

The study published by the nonpartisan EastWest Institute also said Iran is making advances in rocket technology and could develop a ballistic missile capable of firing a 2,200-pound nuclear warhead up to 1,200 miles "in perhaps six to eight years."

After the testing of the Sajjil in November, a senior U.S. military official said Washington believed Iran was testing the first stage of what would be a two-stage rocket. Multiple stages allow long-range missiles to use less fuel.

The launch came just weeks before the vote that could influence Iran's response to the U.S. outreach. Two of the three candidates approved by Iran's constitutional watchdog to run in the June election are reformists who favor improving ties with the West.

The hard-line president has been criticized by his opponents and others for antagonizing the U.S. and mismanaging the country's faltering economy. On Wednesday, the constitutional watchdog approved three candidates to challenge Ahmadinejad, setting up a showdown between reformists and hard-liners.

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Associated Press Writers Pamela Hess in Washington and Steve Weizman and Ian Deitch in Jerusalem contributed to this report.

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